

Winchester Star

Blue Ridge Legal Services Loses Federal Money

By Laura Arenschield

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The Blue Ridge Legal Services attorney's offices on South Kent Street are not lavish.

Instead of Italian art prints in crafted frames adorning the walls, children's crayon drawings on thin sheets of paper are taped in clumsy clusters throughout the office.

The waiting area is a narrow hallway instead of a spacious tailored room. Clients choose reading material from a cheap rack stuffed with pamphlets, not off a mahogany table littered with investment magazines.

The office has never been filled with money, but its clients never cared. They came hoping an attorney could help them through custody battles, or divorces, or help them use the law to keep abusive partners away.

The Winchester Blue Ridge office employed three attorneys to provide free legal services to low-income people in trouble.

One of those attorneys was paid by a federal domestic violence grant from the Department of Justice. For four years, the attorney worked with victims of domestic abuse, filing orders to keep abusers from taking victims' children, property, and peace of mind.

Last week, Blue Ridge's home office in Harrisonburg learned the Department of Justice decided not to renew the grant.

Executive Director John E. Whitfield said that decision will affect the entire Winchester-Frederick County area.

Without the grant's help, the money for a third Winchester attorney simply is not available, Whitfield said.

"There's no way we can pull rabbits out of a hat and assist as many people with two attorneys as we did with three," he said.

The same number of people still will need help, Whitfield said, but Blue Ridge will not be able to supply the same kind of legal assistance it did with the grant's help.

Domestic abuse victims will be the agency's priority, but Whitfield said new guidelines will be used to determine if the client is "low-income" enough to qualify for legal services.

“The grant allowed us to represent victims with incomes up to 200 percent of the poverty level,” he said. “Without the grant, we won’t be able to represent a victim of domestic violence if their income is more than 125 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.”

Under the grant-sponsored guidelines, Whitfield said, a household of three could have an income as high as \$30,000. Without the grant, the household could make only \$19,075 and still qualify for legal aid.

The Department of Justice did not renew Blue Ridge’s grant because other programs had stronger applications, said Angela Harless, Department of Justice spokesperson.

“There wasn’t a funding cut, it was that the competition was that tough,” she said.

Harless said Congress appropriated \$39.7 million for domestic violence programs.

The Department of Justice received 221 applications requesting more than \$98 million, Harless said.

She said a panel of the applicants’ peers recommended support for 94 programs. The Blue Ridge domestic violence program was not among those chosen.

Whitfield said a Department of Justice letter stated the main reason the grant was not renewed was that Blue Ridge had not identified other sources of funding for the project.

“Since we needed their money, they were less inclined to give it to us,” he said. “Seems illogical.”

Anna Hammond, the Blue Ridge attorney whose job will end with the grant’s loss, said she is worried that without a third attorney more victims will allow themselves to be bullied into staying in an abusive relationship by the threat of harm to themselves or their children.

“In my experiences the number one threat abusers use is ‘I’ll get the kids. You can leave, but you can’t take the kids.’ Or, ‘If you take the kids, I’ll kill you,’” Hammond said. “They often use the children as the control issue to keep their partner in the relationship. And I think women feel more secure if they have an attorney.”